Speech

Address By

Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

On the occasion of

Mawson's Huts Foundation Centenary Dinner

Hotel Grand Chancellor, Hobart
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Ladies and gentlemen, I am thrilled to be here with you tonight to mark the centenary of Sir Douglas Mawson’s ‘Aurora’ expedition.

This celebration is all the more timely in that it coincides with the 50th anniversary of the entry into force of the Antarctic Treaty and the 75th anniversary of the proclamation of the Australian Antarctic Territory.

The ultimate affirmation of Mawson’s life’s work.

Friends, in the annals of Australian exploration history, Sir Douglas Mawson is one of the most revered heroes.

The icicled beard, the twinkling intelligent eyes, his stature and charisma are images I have kept in my head since my childhood.

Mawson was a most exhilarating and shining example of courage and fortitude.

Peter FitzSimons has captured the essence of the man and those other intrepid Antarctic explorers in his book: ‘Mawson and the Ice Men of the Heroic Age: Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen’.

This finely researched and evocative volume, will add to the growing body of literature about that great southern land.

A new generation of readers will be inspired by these heroic and intrepid men of Mawson’s expeditions.

As Patron of the Mawson’s Huts Foundation I congratulate the Foundation on its commitment to the memory of our great pioneer, and the conservation of the huts, as part of Australia’s Antarctic heritage.

Since its formation in 1997 the Foundation has organised and funded 9 expeditions, supported by several Australian Government grants.

Another team departs tomorrow to undertake further work.

They will be part of a flotilla of ships that will retrace the original voyage to Macquarie Island and Cape Denison.

I thank those who have brought together relatives of Mawson’s original expedition for this celebration.

On the anniversary of that historic departure one hundred years ago, we reflect on the legacy of Mawson and his fellow expedition members.

They were no ordinary men.

They were scholarly and collegiate; explorers in the name of knowledge and science.
Not for them a simple adventure for self-aggrandisement purposes.

Tonight we acknowledge their selfless, awe-inspiring endeavours.

Their contribution to science and the environment.

Their meticulous mapping and documentation.

Their tenacity and discipline.

Their determination to conquer that unknown icy continent to our south.

Unlocking Antarctica’s mysteries.

Friends, Sir Douglas Mawson was a remarkable Australian.

He was born in Yorkshire but he had a strong connection to our land.

He was a product of Sydney’s famous Fort Street public school where he shone.

The headmaster prophetically observing that: ‘if there is a corner of this planet still unexplored, Douglas Mawson will be the leader of the expedition to unveil its secrets’.

He became a geologist.

He instinctively believed that millions of years ago the two continents must have been linked.

He deduced, therefore, that the Antarctic held answers to Australia’s climatic patterns.

Mawson was 26 when he first accompanied Ernest Shackleton to the Antarctic in 1908.

Fired with enthusiasm, he led his own Australasian Antarctic Expedition three years later.

And what an expedition.

Mawson was bold and entrepreneurial.

He managed to secure equipment, clothing and financial support from literally around the globe.

It was truly a journey of innovation and discovery.

The first major Australian exploration of eastern Antarctica

The first to use radio as a means of communication.

They even produced their own magazine ‘The Glacier Tongue’.

The construction of the huts was also an exercise in lateral thinking.

As Mawson wrote: ‘the pyramid extended to within 5 feet of the ground on the three windward sides so as to include an outside verandah. It lent stability, kept the hut warm, served as a storehouse, laboratory and dog shelter’.

A verandah in the Antarctic!

Who could forget Frank Hurley’s photographs. Those unbelievably powerful images that eventually filtered back to our sunburnt country.

Black and white glimpses of an unknown frontier that still capture our hearts and imaginations. I love the story of Hurley’s
mother writing to Mawson begging him not to take her son, that he was too young.

Friends, it is difficult to conceive that the average age of the 31 men who accompanied Mawson was just 29.

They were all fine young men in their absolute prime. Mainly scientists.

This expedition produced 22 published volumes of scientific results; data that was confirmed and published over the next 30 years.

I salute their family members who are here tonight.

We also remember the two men who accompanied Mawson on the treacherous sledging journey – and who did not return.

Swiss ski champion Xavier Mertz and young British Naval officer Belgrave Ninnis.

Mawson made two further summer voyages in 1929 and 1931.

These expeditions were part of his vision to claim territory for Australia.

In 1936 Britain ceded an area comprising 42 per cent of the Antarctic land mass to Australia - which was proclaimed as the Australian Antarctic Territory.

Mawson had achieved his goal.

He had given Australia the opportunity to stake its own Antarctic claim in this vast continent.

We had acquired land in our own name.

His work led directly to Australia establishing three Australian scientific bases in the Antarctic.

In doing so, he prepared the ground for Australia to play a pivotal role in negotiating the Antarctic Treaty of 1959.

The Treaty was a remarkable achievement, being sealed at the height of the Cold War yet providing that the whole Antarctic continent would remain free from military and nuclear activities.

Instead, nations pledged that Antarctica be used exclusively for science and peaceful cooperation.

To this day that pact has underpinned Australia’s continuous scientific research in the areas of global oceanic and atmospheric circulation, climate change and glaciation.

It has allowed us to protect the pristine wilderness and preserve our sovereignty, to safeguard the vast region of sea and land that is Antarctica.

And in the process to demonstrate an unprecedented and unique model of international cooperation.

Friends, Sir Douglas Mawson was a true scientific scholar with a thirst for knowledge and a quest for adventure.

With the extra qualities of leadership.

I wish I could have known him.

The Douglas Mawson story is one for Australians of all ages to understand, to remember.

To treasure forever in our hearts and minds.

I congratulate the Mawson’s Huts Foundation for the splendid work you do to ensure that we can do so, and that future generations will have the opportunity to marvel at this important part of our scientific history.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to launch Peter FitzSimons’ book this evening – to have this opportunity to thank him
for his compelling portrait of the great Australian Antarctic explorers: Mawson, Scott, and Amundsen. Weaving together their legendary feats into one thrilling account.

The hallmarks of Peter’s writing – and there are now 20 books – are in-depth research and adventure. As I listened to him speak on Radio National this morning about Mawson, I thought about how much I admire enthusiasms and enthusiasm. They shine through in Peter’s work, in his personality, and in the important contribution he makes to our knowledge and understanding of Antarctica’s history, heroes, who we are, our identity, our country.

I think his capacity to do so comes from his country childhood so evocatively captured in his memoir ‘A Simpler Time’, - a special favourite of mine.

Peter, congratulations on this marvellous book ‘Mawson and the Ice-men of the Historic Age’. We are grateful to you for bringing the jaw dropping events of the era dazzlingly to life.

Thank you my friends.